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Soviet Arms: Their Quality Is Upgraded

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Soviet production of warplanes and naval vessels, according to military analysts in Washington and other NATO capitals, has encountered higher costs and slower delivery times in moving into advanced technologies.

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Military Analysis

The new cruiser Slava is one example, the analysts said. The Kommuna shipyard at Nikolayev on the Black Sea needed six years to build the Slava compared with four years for each of the seven cruisers of the Kara class.

The Slava may be intended to counter United States aircraft carrier battle groups. Her main armament is 16 SS-N-12 surface-to-surface missiles with a range of more than 300 miles. But the Slava, like most of the Soviet battle fleet, lacks support ships to keep her operational in distant oceans.

Naval analysts also believe that, as other advanced technology ships of the Slava and other classes are constructed, there will be a decline in launchings because the ships demand more labor, a larger industrial base and cost more.

The expectation is that the Soviet fleet is likely to decline in numerical strength as older vessels are phased out, but will rise in quality.

This is not a unanimous view. Two experts commented that the Russians "never throw anything away" and that the old ships would be put in mothballs, to be reactivated in a crisis.

Past Simplicity in Design

A similar trend toward sophistication is evident in the Soviet aircraft industry. For 20 years, it emphasized simplicty of design, building new planes on proven models. The MIG series is a case in point.

Today, the trend is toward more complicated planes. Many of these are what experts call "mirror images" of successful American planes. Others are being built to deal with United States planes now in production, such as the B-1B bomber.

The Su-25, code-named Frogfoot by the Western allies, is comparable to the Air Force's A-10, built and armed for attack on enemy armor and other vehicles. The Su-25 is being used against insurgents in Afghanistan.

But because its avionics and weaponry are more complex and expensive than those in standard Soviet planes of the last two decades, some intelligence sources predict that they will be more expensive and that production rates will fall.

Late in the 1970's, Soviet warplane production was estimated by American intelligence at 1,200 a year. This is now expected to fall to 1,000 annually, but the new models are likely to be superior in quality.

The potential threat posed by the delivery of the B-1B bomber to the Air Force later in this decade has spawned an improved Soviet interceptor, the MIG-31, called Foxhound by NATO.

This model has retained the MIG-25 design with only slight changes, but it will carry eight new air-to-air missiles. The Air Force estimates the plane's speed at 2.4 times the speed of sound, or fast enough to catch the B-1B, whose maximum speed is reported to be 1.4 times the speed of sound.

The Soviet Union has also been producing the MIG-29, code-named Fulcrum by the West, with initial deployment late last year. This plane appears to have been built to answer the F-16. Though smaller than the American plane, the MIG-29 also appears designed for both aerial combat and ground attack.

The Western alliance has also been watching Soviet development of a new long-range bomber, code-named Blackjack. According to intelligence analysts, the Russians have increased the size of this plane, and its length, wing span and wing area are now greater than those of the B-1B.

The increased size, analysts deduce, is necessary because the Soviet cruise missiles to be carried by the plane are heavier than those with which the B-1B is to be armed.

Another "mirror image" plane is a large Soviet transport under development by the Antonov organization and designated Condor by NATO. Analysts compare it to the C-5 long-range transport. Operational officers say it reflects past Soviet ineffectiveness in moving troops into Afghanistan when, early in 1981, it was evident that the original force was too small to cope with the insurgency.

Reviewing present trends in Soviet ship and aircraft design and production, NATO sources conclude that Soviet numerical superiority will decline but not disappear and the West's technological advantage will be reduced.

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